

CENTRAL AND EAST COUNTY
CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Thursday, July 24, 2003

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Business parks get commuter award

By Lisa Vorderbrueggen

Federal officials have named the Bishop Ranch and Hacienda business parks official "Best Workplaces for Commuters" districts, the first in the state to receive the designation.

Unveiled today, the title provides a kind of good commuting seal of approval for employers and the nearly 50,000 workers in the San Ramon and Pleasanton business parks.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Transportation started the program last year, naming 83 Bay Area firms and public agencies to the "Commuter Choice Employer" list.

They hope the recognition will nudge employers to promote alternatives to driving alone to work.

Officials bestowed the district title this year on four regions that provide commuter benefits to a collection of tenants rather than companies that supply services to their own workers. The other winners are in Atlanta and Denver.

An organization of 1,000 employees that offers commuter services can save its workers \$13,000 in taxes and \$160,000 in gas, parking and vehicle costs annually, said EPA program manager Robin Snyder.

Workplaces such as Hacienda and Bishop Ranch save "their employees time and money, while reducing congestion and air pollution," Snyder said.

To win the commuter-friendly label, a business park or an employer must comply with a checklist of programs designed to cut down on solo driving.

Business parks have to offer transit or car pool subsidies; promote telecommuting; provide preferred parking for car-poolers, showers for bikers and ride-sharing services; and appoint a staff person to coordinate commuter benefits.

Hacienda and Bishop Ranch pioneered large-scale East Bay commuter services, including free shuttles, subsidized bus routes, a transportation resource center for workers and incentives.

Designation as a district provides an "unbiased and easily identifiable set of standards for measurement internally and externally," said Bishop Ranch transportation program manager Marci McGuire.

The parks also consider commuter services an integral part of the amenities they offer to lure and retain businesses.

"Our programs seek to actively incorporate a variety of alternatives into the design and operation of Hacienda as we realize these programs are necessary to meet the needs of today's workforce," said park general manager James Paxson.

The EPA will release the 2003 commuter-friendly company list later this year.